



## Dr. Alan Stewart Thorndike

December 24, 1945 - January 8, 2018

Oxford, Maryland:

Alan Stewart Thorndike died in Easton, Maryland, on Monday, January 8, 2018. For three decades Alan suffered from Parkinson's disease, which one could witness in the form of tremors but would never hear of in the form of complaints. An aggressive pneumonia ended his life too early in the opinion of his friends and family, but mercifully quickly, which was always his hope. He was 72.

Alan, one of five children born to Alan Mouton Thorndike and Mary Louise Van Dyke Thorndike, grew up in Bellport, NY, on the south side of Long Island. There he developed what became a life-long passion for sailing. Adventurous and not always one to follow the rules (he often acted as if "small craft advisories" applied only to those in dinghies), Alan sailed Long Island Sound, Puget Sound, and Barkley Sound; the Strait of Juan De Fuca, Haro Strait, and the Strait of Georgia; the waters surrounding the San Juan Islands; and the rivers and creeks of Chesapeake Bay. When sailing, he was often accompanied by friends, students, and family. Believing boats should be made from wood and willing to put in the work to care for them, Alan captained various catboats; a self-made 8' dinghy, Lil' D; a 19' William Garden-designed friendship Sloop, Diane; a 1962 vintage 41' Cheoy Lee ketch, BlueWater; and, finally, the Peregrina, a 30' sloop, also built by Cheoy Lee in 1962, which he restored and sailed in his retirement years. Alan left Bellport to attend the Northfield Mount Hermon school in

Massachusetts. College took him to Wesleyan University in Connecticut where in 1967 he earned a BA with an interdisciplinary focus on math, physics, and geology. At Wesleyan, Alan was a member of Alpha Delta Phi and gained Phi Beta Kappa membership. After college, he travelled to the Pacific Northwest where he earned his Ph.D. in geophysics from the University of Washington in 1978. Under the mentorship of his close friend Norbert Untersteiner, Alan was one of the early scientists studying the Arctic sea ice and climate change. At the age of 29, he was the Chief Scientist on the ice for the Arctic Ice Dynamics Joint Experiment (AIDJEX) and was one of the founding members of what is now the Polar Science Center at the University of Washington. Alan is credited with developing the notion of the thickness of the sea ice as a variable, a concept that is at the heart of most sea ice models used today. While on the ice, Alan was crucial to the scientific planning and field execution for AIDJEX. As it happened, leading the “field execution” included rescuing a colleague who slipped down a snow slope and directing the evacuation of the main Big Bear camp when the runway broke up in October 1975. While some deny climate change and others fight to slow or reverse it, we’re all indebted to Alan for his contributions to our understanding of it.

Alan’s professional passion was teaching. He joined the faculty at the University of Puget Sound (UPS) in Tacoma, Washington, in 1983. He became the second University Professor of the Natural Sciences and was awarded emeritus status as a Professor of Physics upon his retirement in 2012. Alan checked all of the boxes as a member of the academy: publishing papers in peer reviewed journals, chairing his department, serving on faculty and board committees, and organizing academic programming such as the Max Plank Symposium, which he hosted at UPS in honor of the 100th anniversary of the quantum. But he was most proud of his contributions as a teacher, often enabled by his skilled craftsmanship of wood and metal. He loved to recreate famous physics experiments, such as the Zeeman effect, with students in his lab. He innovated with teaching both within his department

(at one point attempting to teach electromagnetism “backwards”) and across disciplines (including courses on the Origins of Life and climate modeling). He designed the multi-story Foucault pendulum that hangs in UPS’s Harned Hall and built the Pemrose tiling that lies beneath it. But his crowning achievement of the intersection of physics and craftsmanship was the model he built, based on the conceptual theories of his colleague, Jim Evans, of the Antikythera Mechanism — a 2,200 year old device, which went undiscovered for 1,800 years, that has been labeled the world’s first computer and is believed to model the movement of celestial bodies. (See picture and look it up in your favorite search engine; it’s worth the read.)

Alan’s talents extended far beyond the sciences and the classroom. He ran cross-country and track, and he completed several marathons. He worked on the Appalachian Mountain Club trail crew in the White Mountains and enjoyed alpine climbing in the Pacific Northwest. In Washington State, he won 24-hour time trial bicycle races (once logging 391 miles, as apparently 65 laps around the 6-mile track didn’t quite feel like enough). And he put more than 11,000 miles on his recumbent bike during his last two years of life in Maryland. Alan played the recorder and the piano. He marbled paper, practiced Japanese calligraphy, and enjoyed bridge. He built clocks and a mechanism to measure the tides in Oxford’s Town Creek. He forged bronze, making tools, gears, sailing hardware, and gifts. He was a master woodworker who built beautiful furniture for his family, bowls and boxes for friends, and toys for his grandchildren.

Alan went by many names. As a boy, friends and family would call him “Nicky,” owing to his Christmas Eve birthday. As a teenager, “Nicky” gave way to “Al” and eventually to “Alan.” He was “Angel” to his wife of 42 years, Louise; “Dad” to his children — daughters, Stewart and Ashley, and son, John; and “Deeda” to his grandkids, who absolutely adored him. Whatever we may call him, we miss him deeply.

At Alan’s request, there will be no services. His family looks forward to hosting

in Alan's honor a musical concert and celebration for family members and the Oxford community this Spring. In lieu of flowers, those interested in charitable contributions are urged to consider making monetary donations to the American Parkinson's Disease Association or simply doing something kind for someone in need, as he so often did.

# Cemetery Details

**Private**

# Tribute Wall



“ *Dr. Alan Stewart Thorndike*

October 26, 2023 at 06:42 PM



“ *Dr. Alan Stewart Thorndike*

January 28, 2023 at 12:44 PM



“ *Dr. Alan Stewart Thorndike*

January 28, 2023 at 08:03 AM



“ *Alan was a favorite professor of mine. I graduated in 1988. I got diagnosed with MS in 1998. He was so honest about the struggle. Brilliant man and so kind. I just found this. Holding the family in the light. Alison*

**Alison Whiteman** - February 26, 2019 at 12:41 AM



“ *So sorry to hear of Alan's passing. Please accept my condolences. I hope his memories help comfort you. Sincerely, Merri Winn (Northfield Mount Hermon)*

**Merri Winn** - November 28, 2018 at 01:06 PM

DW

“ I worked with Alan on the AIDJEX project in the mid 1970s, and spent time in Barrow and at an ice camp with him. The anecdote I relate to my students every year, however, occurred in Seattle while returning from a coffee shop to the university. We had been discussing catastrophe theory and caustics at the coffee shop, a new topic for me, but one that Alan as usual had mastered. It was a sunny day. As we passed through a parking lot, Alan suddenly pointed and proclaimed "There see that. A perfect example of a Swallowtail catastrophe." He was pointing to a reflection off a shiny car bumper on to the pavement. We spent several minutes dissecting the features of this complex image. I have subsequently become familiar enough with catastrophe theory to be able to describe to my ocean mapping students the caustics (catastrophes) that occur in underwater sound. I always give credit to Alan for exposing me to this topic.

*Dave Wells*

*Universities of New Brunswick, New Hampshire, and Southern Mississippi.*

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**David Wells** - September 30, 2018 at 05:41 AM

FL

“ As the English exchange student at Mount Hermon in the class of '63, I was Alan's roommate for a year. I was struck by his fierce intelligence and the way he sailed through math problems that had taken me ages to master a year earlier in the UK. He was also unbelievably laid back and because of this I fell for most of his japes. I particularly remember, when a terrible smell pervaded our room one night, he suggested that I open the window knowing full well that there was a skunk just outside! But all this was innocent fun and he became a loyal friend helping me out on numerous occasions.

I see from his obituary that he not only fulfilled his early promise - he exceeded it handsomely. Maybe my association with him was short but I am very grateful to have had it. I am saddened at his passing. Just remember that he left you a treasure chest of memories into which you should dig often.

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**Francis Lambert** - June 13, 2018 at 04:14 PM

AD

“ I was saddened to hear of Dr. Thorndike's passing. He stands out in my memories of University of Puget Sound as a caring, fun, passionate teacher. I only had him for one class, but a decade later the memory of him stuck with me.

I remember going out sailing with him on the Puget Sound. It was a miserably rainy day and I was the only student along, but it was fun. We donned rain gear and headed out to sail. Despite the tremors, he ably handled the sailboat.

My condolence to the Thorndike family. You and the world have lost a great man.

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**Aaron DeVore** - April 27, 2018 at 08:08 PM

GT

“ Ginny Thorndike shares a favorite poem:

*When the ripe fruit falls  
its sweetness distills and trickles away  
into the veins of the earth.*

*When fulfilled people die  
the essential oil of their experience enters  
the veins of living space, and adds a glister  
to the atom, to the body of immortal chaos.*

*For space is alive  
and it stirs like a swan  
whose feathers glister  
silky with oil of distilled experience.*

*D.H. Lawrence*

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**Ginny Thorndike** - January 23, 2018 at 10:30 AM

AA

“ We were so fortunate to have known Alan these past five years. A true Renaissance man, he seemed to know about everything. But what stands out for us was his modesty and great kindness. We have a beautiful walnut picture frame he made for us when our first grandchild was born. It has pride-of-place in our living room. Alan was immensely interesting, creative and courageous. A bit of a rebel spirit , with a great zest for life, was there, too. We will miss Alan very much.

*Ann Ashby and Ron Kopicki*

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**Ann Ashby** - January 17, 2018 at 07:36 AM

MD

“ Ken & I were very fortunate to meet and get to know Alan at the Senior Center bridge group. He has certainly enriched our lives and has been an incredible inspiration to live our lives to the fullest. We are unutterably sad about losing him and know that we will continue to miss him.

*The more that we have learned about him the more we have realized what an extraordinary person he was. He had our utmost respect and admiration.*

*We send our thoughts and caring to his family of whom he was very proud. You were blessed to have such an awesome husband, father and grandfather. May your memories bring you healing, happiness and peace.*

*Mary and Ken Davis  
January 15, 2018*

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**Mary H. Davis** - January 15, 2018 at 05:50 PM

EK

“ I have so many nice memories of your dad when we were growing up, Ashely. He was so soft spoken and kind. I remember him waving to me as he rode his bike down my parent's street as he headed home from UPS. I love your family and all of us Keliher's are sending our love to all of you. Love, Elizabeth Keliher and family

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**Elizabeth Keliher** - January 12, 2018 at 09:41 PM

MC

“ I only just learned about Dr. Thorndike from reading Michael Valliant's article in the January 2018 Tidewater Times. I kept thinking how much he reminded me of my father. My father shared many of Alan's talents and interests, although riding a bike for 24 hours was not one of them! Mathematically, Alan seems like he was my dad "squared." Among many things my father crafted, the most amazing was his grandfather's clock designed and built from scratch. It skipped from the 30th to the 1st of the month as well as "leaping" every 4 years, both automatically by virtue of hand cut cogs. I had hoped to meet Alan to talk about these clock features since they no longer work (age-worn.) I just knew chatting with him would be like channeling my dad. I could not wait. In looking up his background just today, his obituary turned up, stunning me. I never met Alan and yet I feel I have lost someone really remarkable-- again. What a loss for his family, colleagues, friends, and the Oxford community. My condolences.

*Martha Wroten Cole, Oxford, MD*

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**Martha W. Cole** - January 11, 2018 at 05:43 PM

“ Dear Louise,

*It is hard to know how to grieve the passing of someone like Alan. If anyone was the embodiment of all things superb and excellent in the life of the mind and the actions of a truly good person, it was Alan Thorndike. He leaves an indelible imprint on all who came in contact with him. As a colleague in a university environment, he gave freely of his vast knowledge and added sheer brilliance to the intellectual interests of his friends and students. Mere exposure to him was an enriching experience. From outfitting a physics laboratory to crafting fine furniture, assembling with Newtonian finesse magnificent clocks, building and sailing boats, and explaining abstruse scientific concepts with stunning clarity, he was unerring in the way he could capture and communicate the power of deep ideas. A master teacher, he was the perfect mentor for his many dedicated students; and he understood how to excite and sustain the desire for learning in all areas of endeavor. He was a great individual to have present when important scholars visited the university, for he could, with grace and insight, ease everyone into the kind of debate and conversation that had a lasting impact. He always stood ready to support younger faculty members and to promote their research. Alan had a catholicity of interests that made it possible for him to relate to colleagues in various disciplines with impressive understanding and encouragement. Despite his rich background, he was forever eager to learn and embrace new challenges in fields diverse from his own. Alan's death leaves all who knew him with the lasting memory of a genuinely admirable human being that does not dull so much as sharpen the pain of his loss. He was a great person to have known and been touched by over the years.*

*Sandy and I cherish the friendship we shared with the two of you during our time together at UPS.*

*Frank Cousens*

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Frank and Sandy Cousens - January 10, 2018 at 05:37 PM

NW

“ Louise and Family,  
I am so sorry for your loss. Alan was a Renaissance man, as I am sure you know. From making most of the furniture in his house, to building and sailing sail boats, to playing the piano and recorder, to teaching himself Chinese calligraphy (just this past year), to making a clock (also this past year), to making a tide gauge, to riding his bicycle to Denton and back in the summer!, and more feats I am sure I have missed. As I drove him to bride games he would relate keen loving observations about his family and grandchildren. I often relate his wry comments to friends. As a retired physics professor, he had an insatiable curiosity. The last time I spoke to him was to tell him he didn't tell me the truth. His response was, "Well, I do lie". I made my comment because when I asked him what his latest project was he probably told me his clock but he did not tell me he was making me a bridge card box, complete with inlaid heart, spade, etc. symbols. I will miss him deeply.  
With love to you all,  
Nancy Wallace

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Nancy Wallace - January 10, 2018 at 08:34 AM

AN

“ I would like to express my deepest sympathy to each of you for your loss. Almighty God is aware of the afflictions that we suffer and the deep distress that we encounter. He assures us through his Word that he is going to bring an end to death and all the things that causes us suffering and pain.

Psalm 31:7

Revelation 21:3-5

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Annette - January 09, 2018 at 01:06 PM